

Challenging Norms: Self-Representation And Activism In Documentary Film

Yerleşik Kabullere Meydan Okumak:

Belgesel Sinemada Öz-Temsil ve Aktivizm

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Abstract

Ideology encompasses a system of beliefs, values, and ideas that influence how individuals perceive the world and their role within it. Films, as a significant aspect of popular culture, mirror and reinforce dominant ideological values and norms. The ideological reinforcement of representations in films manifests through character portrayals, thematic choices, and storytelling. This can occur through stereotypes, normalization of specific values, or the exclusion of alternative perspectives. The “normal” represents dominant cultural and social standards defining acceptable behavior, appearance, and identity. These norms can marginalize individuals who deviate from them, fostering isolation, exclusion, or shame. Films challenge these constraints by presenting alternative realities and possibilities for human experiences. Cinema significantly contributes to identity construction by representing diverse identities and fostering a sense of community among marginalized or excluded individuals. First-person filmmaking, rooted in self-representation, emphasizes personal storytelling and subjective viewpoints. Filmmakers often draw from their own experiences to examine broader social and political issues, providing nuanced perspectives that challenge dominant narratives of normalcy. Personal storytelling serves as a powerful medium for addressing social and political issues, creating empathy more effectively than abstract statistics or concepts. The notion that “the personal is political,” central to various social justice movements, underscores how personal experiences intersect with systemic structures and calls for collective action toward systemic change. Expecting a Grain of Sand (Dir. Aslı Akdağ, 2020) explores the experience of a single woman raising a child in a modern city within a conservative country. This autobiographical documentary scrutinizes societal roles assigned to women, critiques social inequalities, and seeks to redefine family structures and the idealized concept of motherhood. Through this analysis, the film demonstrates the transformative potential of cinematic narratives as tools of counter-ideological discourse, offering an avenue to reimagine and challenge societal norms.

Keywords: Documentary, activism, family, motherhood, self-representation

Özet

İdeoloji, bireylerin dünyayı ve rollerini algılamalarını etkileyen inanç, değer ve fikirler sistemini kapsar. Popüler kültürün önemli bir unsuru olarak filmler, baskın ideolojik değerleri ve normları yansıtır ve pekiştirir. Filmlerde temsillerin ideolojik olarak pekiştirilmesi, karakter tasvirleri, tematik seçimler ve anlatı yapıları aracılığıyla gerçekleşir. Bu durum, klişeler, belirli değerlerin normalleştirilmesi veya alternatif bakış açılarının dışlanması yoluyla ortaya çıkabilir. “Normal” olan, kabul edilebilir davranış, görünüm ve kimliği tanımlayan baskın kültürel ve toplumsal standartları ifade eder. Bu normlar, onlardan sapma gösteren bireyleri dışlayabilir, izole edebilir veya utanç hissetmelerine neden olabilir. Filmler, alternatif gerçeklikler ve insan deneyimlerine dair olasılıklar sunarak bu sınırlandırmalara meydan okur. Sinema, kimlik inşasına önemli katkılar sunarak farklı kim-

likleri temsil eder ve marjinalleşmiş ya da dışlanmış bireyler arasında aidiyet duygusunu güçlendirir. Öz-temsile dayanan birinci şahıs sineması, kişisel hikâye anlatımına ve öznel bakış açılarına odaklanır. Yönetmenler sıklıkla kendi deneyimlerinden yola çıkarak daha geniş toplumsal ve politik meseleleri ele alır, böylece normal kabul edilen anlatılara meydan okuyan daha derinlikli bakış açıları sunarlar. Kişisel hikâye anlatımı, soyut istatistikler veya kavramlardan daha etkili bir şekilde empati yaratabilen güçlü bir araçtır. “Kişisel olan politiktir” anlayışı, çeşitli toplumsal adalet hareketlerinin merkezinde yer alır ve bireysel deneyimlerin sistematik yapılarla nasıl keştiğini vurgulayarak sistemik değişim için kolektif eylem çağrısında bulunur. Bekleyiş (Yön. Aslı Akdağ, 2020), muhafazakâr bir ülkede modern bir şehirde çocuk yetiştiren bekar bir kadının deneyimini ele alır. Bu otobiyografik belgesel, kadınlara atfedilen toplumsal rolleri sorgular, toplumsal eşitsizlikleri eleştirir ve aile yapıları ile idealize edilen annelik kavramını yeniden tanımlamayı amaçlar. Bu analiz aracılığıyla film, sinemasal anlatıların karşı-ideolojik söylem üretme potansiyelini gözler önüne sererek toplumsal normları yeniden hayal etme ve onlara meydan okuma imkânı sunar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: belgesel, aktivizm, aile, annelik, öz-temsil

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary film and media studies, the relationship between cinema and ideology has been a focal point of critical inquiry. Cinema operates not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a cultural apparatus that mirrors, reinforces, or challenges dominant ideological structures. Ideology, in this context, refers to the constellation of beliefs, values, and norms that shape societal perceptions of identity, gender, family, and belonging. As a powerful medium of representation, cinema contributes to the construction of social meaning by framing what is perceived as “normal” and marginalizing what falls outside of these normative boundaries. Particularly in the realm of documentary film, this representational power becomes a site of political contestation, where personal storytelling can challenge hegemonic narratives and open up space for counter-discourses.

Over the past two decades, the increasing prominence of first-person documentaries and autobiographical narratives in non-fiction cinema has paralleled broader shifts toward what scholars have termed a “new transparency”- a cultural turn that emphasizes authenticity, subjective voice, and the collapsing boundaries between private and public life (Thompson, 2000). Within this paradigm, personal narratives become not only a form of self-expression but also a means of political intervention, aligning with the feminist axiom that “the personal is political.” Such narratives contribute to the rise of what has been termed “everyday activism,” where individuals utilize digital platforms and audiovisual media to articulate experiences that question dominant norms and advocate for social change (Vivienne, 2016).

This article situates its inquiry at the intersection of documentary filmmaking, self-representation, and ideological critique. It takes as its case study *Expecting a Grain of Sand* (2020), an autobiographical documentary directed by Aslı Akdağ, which centers on the lived experience of a single woman raising a child in a conservative society. By foregrounding the filmmaker’s personal journey, the film interrogates socially constructed norms surrounding family and motherhood, while simultaneously offering an alternative vision of care, identity, and agency. The film thus serves as a compelling instance of personal documentary activism, where subjective experience becomes a lens through which broader systemic inequalities are rendered visible.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it seeks to analyze how *Expecting a Grain of Sand* employs first-person narration and visual storytelling to critique the normative ideologies embedded in familial and maternal roles. Second, it aims to theorize the role of autobiographical documentary in generating what Iris Marion Young (1997) calls a “communicative democracy”, wherein storytelling fosters inclusivity and empathy by elevating marginalized voices. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from feminist media theory, participatory culture, and everyday activism, the article demonstrates how first-person filmmaking can function as both a tool

of self-representation and a catalyst for social transformation.

Methodologically, the study combines content analysis with discourse analysis to examine the narrative structure, visual composition, and thematic motifs of the film. In doing so, it considers both the cinematic strategies and the sociopolitical implications of self-representation in autobiographical documentary. The analysis follows a multi-scalar model of social change, inspired by Vivienne's (2016) framework, which traces the movement of personal storytelling from individual awareness to broader cultural transformation.

The article proceeds in five sections. Following this introduction, the second section reviews the theoretical underpinnings linking ideology, cinema, and identity. The third section explores the emergence of first-person documentary and its relation to everyday activism. The fourth section offers a close reading of *Expecting a Grain of Sand*, analyzing how the film constructs a counter-ideological narrative through personal storytelling. The final section reflects on the broader implications of the case study, discussing how autobiographical documentaries contribute to reimagining norms and fostering democratic participation through media.

2. CINEMA AND IDEOLOGY

Cinema and ideology are closely related as cinema is a powerful tool for the dissemination of ideological messages. Ideology refers to a set of beliefs, values, and ideas that shape the way people perceive the world and their place in it. Movies, like other forms of popular culture, reflect and reinforce dominant ideological beliefs and values. Films can be used to promote or challenge certain ideologies. Moreover, the way films are made and marketed can also reflect ideological biases. Similarly, the portrayal of certain groups in films, such as the demonization of women or the romanticization of the motherhood, can perpetuate certain ideological stereotypes. In this sense, cinema has the power to shape the understanding of the world and the place of the person in it.

The reinforcement of representations in cinema ideologically refers to the way in which films can perpetuate dominant ideologies through their representation of characters, themes, and stories. This reinforcement can happen in a variety of ways, such as through the use of stereotypes, the promotion of certain values, or the exclusion of certain perspectives. One common way in which films reinforce dominant ideologies is through the use of stereotypes. For example, first cinema films¹ have often perpetuated negative stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities, portraying them as criminals, terrorists, or exotic caricatures. These stereotypes not only reinforce negative beliefs and attitudes towards these groups, but they also obscure the diversity and complexity of these communities. Another way in which films can reinforce ideologies is through the promotion of certain values. For example, many first cinema films promote individualism, consumerism, portraying success as the result of hard work and perseverance. These values are often aligned with the dominant ideology of capitalism and serve to reinforce the status quo. Finally, the exclusion of certain perspectives and voices can also perpetuate dominant ideologies. For example, the underrepresentation of women and people of color in leading roles in first cinema films can perpetuate the idea that white men are the default protagonists and that other groups are not as important or deserving of representation. Young (2011, p. 58) uses the term 'cultural imperialism' to describe how dominant societal narratives both obscure the unique perspectives of marginalized groups and simultaneously stereotype and position them as 'the other.' The reinforcement of representations in cinema ideologically can have significant consequences, shaping the understanding of self and the world around her.

Identity construction and cinema are closely intertwined as films can play a significant role in shaping the sense of self and identity. Cinema can provide a platform for exploring complex issues of identity, representation, and belonging, as well as offer a space for individuals to see themselves and their experiences reflected on sc-

¹ First cinema term used to cover the commercial - mainstream-industrial cinema as formulated by Solanas and Getino. 1970, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, *Towards a Third Cinema*. Cinéaste, 4(3), 1-10.

reen. One way in which cinema contributes to identity construction is through the representation of diverse identities on screen. Films that feature diverse characters and perspectives can provide audiences with new ways of understanding themselves and others, and can challenge dominant cultural narratives about what it means to be “normal” or “acceptable.” Cinema can also contribute to identity construction by providing a sense of community and belonging, as Papacharissi defines networked publics (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 20). Films that center on specific communities or subcultures can help individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences or identities, and can offer a sense of validation and support.

Identity construction and cinema are deeply interconnected, as films have the power to shape the understanding of herself and the world around her. This connection becomes even more pronounced in the context of “new transparency,” a contemporary trend in media and culture that highlights personal storytelling, authenticity, and the dissolution of boundaries between public and private life (Thompson, 2000). Through this lens, cinema not only reflects individual and collective identities but also actively participates in their formation, offering narratives that resonate with the evolving sense of self in an increasingly open and interconnected world. This trend has been facilitated by the rise of social media and digital technologies, which have enabled individuals to share their stories and experiences with a wider audience than ever before.

One of the key features of the new transparency is the use of personal storytelling as a means of communicating social and political issues (Thompson, 2000). Personal stories are often seen as more effective in engaging audiences and fostering empathy than abstract concepts or statistics, as they provide a nuanced and humanized perspective on complex problems. This emphasis on personal narratives has been amplified by the rise of social media, where individuals increasingly share intimate details of their lives, blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres. Social media platforms, however, also exemplify social convergence, where distinct social contexts—such as family, friends, and professional connections—merge into a single space. Unlike physical settings where behavior adapts to specific norms, social media requires users to navigate these mixed audiences simultaneously without clear guidelines. While this convergence enables more efficient information sharing and fosters transparency, it also creates challenges, as individuals must balance authenticity with the complexities of presenting themselves across diverse groups (Boyd, 2008, p. 19). This duality highlights both the potential and the dilemmas of the new transparency in an interconnected digital age.

2.1 Personal Is Political So Does Personal Stories In Everyday Activism

The phrase “the personal is political” is a slogan that emerged from the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. It highlights the interconnectedness between personal experiences and broader political structures and systems (Hanisch, 2006). The phrase suggests that issues that are often dismissed as “personal” or “private”—such as domestic violence, reproductive rights, and gender-based discrimination—are in fact deeply political and are shaped by power dynamics and systemic inequalities.

Personal storytelling and the blurring of boundaries between public and private life are evident across various media forms, including documentary film, social media, and memoir. In documentary film, personal storytelling and self representation through first person documentaries has become increasingly popular as a means of exploring social and political issues, with filmmakers using their own experiences as a starting point for broader discussions (Lane, 2002, p. 5).

The new transparency represents a shift towards more personal and authentic forms of storytelling. By prioritizing personal experience and authenticity, the new transparency has the potential to create more empathetic and humanizing media and culture, and to challenge dominant narratives and power structures. However, it also raises important questions about privacy, consent, and representation, and requires careful consideration

of ethical and political issues.

The concept of new transparency, with its focus on personal storytelling and authenticity, aligns closely with the ethos of everyday activism, which emphasizes grassroots efforts and individual contributions to social and political change. Individual contributions acts as a catalyst for participatory culture, as it lowers barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement while fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support. As Henry Jenkins et al. (2006) describe, participatory culture thrives on the belief that individual contributions matter, encouraging members to create, share, and connect through informal mentorship and collaborative creativity. This can include things like community organizing, letter-writing campaigns, or social media activism. By centering personal experiences and amplifying diverse voices, the new transparency provides a powerful platform for everyday activists to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for change.

In this sense, everyday activism and first person filmmaking are two interrelated concepts that have emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional forms of political action and representation. Both approaches prioritize the agency and voice of individuals and seek to challenge dominant narratives through personal storytelling and activism. First person filmmaking, on the other hand, refers to a style of documentary filmmaking that is characterized by personal storytelling and subjective perspectives. First person filmmakers often use their own experiences and perspectives as a starting point for exploring broader social and political issues. This approach can help to challenge dominant narratives and provide a more nuanced understanding of complex issues.

The intersection of everyday activism and first person filmmaking can be seen in the growing trend of personal documentary activism. This involves using first person filmmaking techniques to document and raise awareness about social and political issues, often with a focus on local or community-based activism. Personal documentary activism can be a powerful tool for engaging audiences and mobilizing individuals to take action in their own communities. Overall, everyday activism and first person filmmaking share a commitment to empowering individuals and challenging dominant narratives through personal storytelling and political action. By prioritizing the agency and voice of individuals, these approaches offer a more democratic and inclusive model of political engagement and representation. Young puts it out as storytelling enhances arguments in a communicative democracy by being inherently more inclusive than deliberative processes. Deliberation often favors those who are dispassionate, well-educated, or confident in asserting their views. In contrast, storytelling allows everyone to contribute their unique narratives, styles, and meanings. Since every individual shares their story with equal legitimacy, all stories carry equal value within the communicative context (Young, 1997, p. 73).

Self-representation in the context of first person documentaries refers to the practice of individuals portraying their own stories, identities, and lived experiences through the medium of film. This approach is marked by a high level of personal involvement, with the filmmaker frequently taking on multiple roles—protagonist, narrator, and creator—thus blurring the boundaries between the storyteller and the story. This dynamic aligns with Goffman's (1959) concept of performing identity both front and backstage. In autobiographical documentaries, self-representation serves several critical purposes. First, it challenges dominant narratives by centering the filmmaker's own voice and perspective, contesting mainstream portrayals that often marginalize or misrepresent their experiences. This is particularly significant for individuals from underrepresented or oppressed groups, as it allows them to reclaim agency over their stories. Second, it humanizes social issues by making abstract social or political topics more relatable and emotionally engaging. The filmmaker's lived experiences provide a nuanced, firsthand account that resonates with audiences, fostering empathy and understanding. Third, autobiographical documentaries often explore identity and subjectivity by examining the intersection of personal and societal dimensions such as gender, culture, race, and family. This introspective process deconstructs the concept of the "normal" and offers alternative ways of viewing identity. Fourth, self-representation blurs the boundaries between public and private life. By sharing intimate aspects of their lives, filmmakers challenge the traditional separation between personal and political realms, highlighting how personal experiences are deeply

intertwined with larger societal structures and norms. Finally, self-representation fosters connection and activism by inviting audiences to engage with broader social and political issues. This form of storytelling often serves as a catalyst for dialogue, reflection, and collective action, aligning with the principles of everyday activism. In sum, self-representation in autobiographical documentaries is a powerful tool for reshaping narratives, fostering inclusivity, and creating authentic and transformative cinematic experiences. It challenges traditional modes of representation while redefining the role of the filmmaker as both an artist and an activist.

The intersection of personal documentary activism and Vivienne’s model of sharing private stories with networked publics underscores the multifaceted potential of storytelling as a catalyst for social change (Vivienne, 2016, p. 9). Personal documentary activism leverages first-person filmmaking to amplify individual voices and mobilize communities, aligning seamlessly with the progression of social change described in Vivienne’s framework. Both approaches emphasize the transformative power of sharing personal narratives, beginning with individual self-awareness and extending to intimate circles, mutual support networks, and targeted influential audiences. At their core, they prioritize the agency of storytellers while navigating the complexities of engaging broader, and sometimes resistant, publics. Together, they illustrate how storytelling, when rooted in authenticity and purpose, can challenge dominant narratives and foster both micro-level and systemic social change.

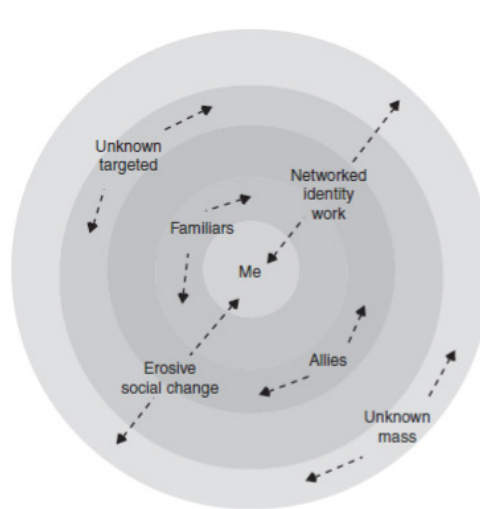


Figure 1. “The sharing of private stories with networked publics as everyday activism” (Vivienne, 2016, p.9)

Social change unfolds across different levels, progressing from the micro to the meso and macro scales. At the micro level, the first form of social change arises from the therapeutic belief that an individual has a story worth sharing. This shift in personal awareness often precedes a second form of social change, which occurs among an individual’s intimate publics, including family, close friends, and acquaintances both online and off-line. This group is referred to here as ‘familiars’. The third form of social change takes place through mutual support among members of support groups and the online storytelling community, referred to as ‘allies.’ These are individuals the storyteller encounters during the process of crafting and sharing their story, influencing and being influenced by them in return. At the meso level, a fourth kind of change becomes possible when a specific audience is targeted for their position of influence and their duty of care, which requires them to listen. This group, referred to as the ‘unknown targeted’ includes teachers, politicians, human resource and professional development specialists, social service providers, and policymakers. With a mandate to consider equity and diversity, they have a vested interest in engaging with content created by the communities they serve. The fifth and most complex form of social change occurs at the macro level, among audiences who are either unsympathetic to the storyteller’s perspective or part of a vast and undefined group (‘unknown mass’). This stage represents the most challenging and unpredictable form of change.

2.2 Cinema As A Way Of Coping With The Limitation Of The Normal

The concept of the “normal” refers to the dominant cultural and social norms that shape the understanding of what is acceptable, desirable, or expected in terms of behavior, appearance, and identity. These norms can be limiting, especially for individuals who do not conform to them, and can create feelings of isolation, exclusion, and shame.

Cinema can serve as a way of coping with the limitations of the normal by providing a space for individuals to explore and challenge societal norms and expectations. By presenting alternative visions of reality and possibilities for human experience, cinema can offer a way to imagine and create new modes of being and belonging. Cinema can help to challenge these limitations by presenting alternative visions of reality and possibilities for human experience. Films that feature marginalized communities, unconventional perspectives, or subversive themes can help to expand the understanding of what is possible and acceptable, and can promote empathy and understanding. Moreover, cinema can serve as a means of escape from the limitations of the normal. By providing a temporary suspension of reality, films can offer a space for individuals to imagine and explore alternative possibilities for their lives and identities. This can be especially important for individuals who face systemic barriers to realizing their full potential or who are unable to express their true selves in their daily lives. Finally, cinema can also offer a way of coping with the limitations of the normal by providing a sense of community and belonging. Films that center on specific communities or subcultures can help individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences or identities, and can offer a sense of validation and support.

Building on the role of cinema in challenging the limitations of the “normal,” the concepts of family and motherhood offer fertile ground for examining how dominant cultural norms shape the understanding of identity and belonging. The “normal” family is often idealized as a heteronormative, nuclear unit, with motherhood constructed around expectations of selflessness, nurturing, and unwavering devotion. These rigid norms not only marginalize individuals and families who do not conform to these ideals but also place undue pressure on those who do. Cinema provides a platform to question and reimagine these constructs, creating space for alternative representations of family dynamics and maternal identities that reflect the diversity and complexity of real-life experiences. By focusing on family and motherhood as contested sites of the “normal,” the study highlights how film can serve as a medium for deconstructing traditional narratives and fostering more inclusive understandings of care, identity, and belonging.

The concept of family has undergone significant changes in recent decades, as social and cultural norms around family structures have shifted. «Normally», the nuclear family -consisting of a married couple and their biological children- was seen as the normative family structure. However, today there are a variety of family structures that are recognized, including single-parent families, blended families, same-sex parent families, and chosen families. The concept of family has also become more fluid, as individuals have greater agency and autonomy in choosing their own family structures. The rise of new technologies and social media has also led to the emergence of new forms of family, such as online communities and support networks. These new forms of family allow individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences or identities, even if they are not biologically or legally related. Despite these changes, the family remains an important social institution that plays a key role in shaping individuals’ identities and experiences. The diversity of family structures and experiences underscores the need for policies and social norms that are inclusive and supportive of all families, regardless of their composition.

As the «normal» family changed, so did motherhood. The state of being a wife and mother in society can vary widely depending on cultural and societal norms, as well as individual experiences and circumstances. Traditionally, women have been expected to take on the role of wife and mother as their primary social and familial

identity, with the responsibilities of caregiving and domestic work falling largely on their shoulders. While there has been some progress in recent decades towards greater gender equality and recognition of the value of caregiving work, women who take on the role of wife and mother may still face challenges and inequalities.

3. EXPECTING A GRAIN OF SAND

The sample of the study is a production that brings the discussion of the norms surrounding family and motherhood into focus. *Expecting a Grain of Sand* (Dir. Aslı Akdağ, 2020) focuses on what happens if a single woman is obliged to bring up a baby without a father in a “modern” city of a conservative country. This first person documentary thoroughly researches social roles of women and intellectualizes social inequality, searching for new answers to variety of family structures, idealized role of motherhood.

Content and discourse analysis have been employed to explore how *Expecting a Grain of Sand* (Dir. Aslı Akdağ, 2020) critiques dominant cultural norms surrounding family and motherhood. Through content analysis, the study explores the film’s narrative structure, themes, and visual elements to highlight its critique of societal expectations. Discourse analysis further investigates how the film’s first-person storytelling and self-representation construct a counter-ideological narrative that questions the “normal” and fosters empathy. By combining these methods, the article reveals how the film functions as both a personal and political tool for addressing social inequalities and transforming cultural perceptions.

‘Everyday activism’—the act of sharing personal stories in public spaces to challenge the status quo—also seeks to bring about gradual shifts in attitudes over extended periods. As these changes spread among networked publics, they contribute to a deep transformation of social norms. The director approaches the question of how I can represent those who act antipathetically towards my identity and family while trying to establish functional relationships, with a sharp attitude towards the representation of the father, or rather, his lack of representation in the film. At the beginning of the film, while the process of learning German and going to Germany is seen, which is an effort for formation within the definition of a “normal” family, the film moves to a new path in the flow of real life. Family and motherhood starts to gain new meanings in this context.

The activism of the film begins during the production process. Primarily in the director’s immediate family. The director’s mother, brother, aunt&uncle and grandmother, who reacted very harshly, accept the situation later in the process and adapt to the new normal. The director also experiences the transformation within herself. In one scene of the film, while chatting with her friend to share the good news of the baby on her social media account, she asks, “What will people say?” While she expresses her hesitations by saying, the process ends with the documentary film that forms the case of this study. Beyond all these the film can also be considered as taking precautions for the film director’s unborn child when there are social pressures.

Mansbridge and Flaster describe everyday activists as individuals who, while not engaging directly with formal political structures, take actions in their daily lives to address and counteract injustices (Mansbridge & Flaster, 2007, p. 627). An anecdote helps illustrate everyday activism emerges during a tea conversation with the director’s neighbours. While the neighbors try to convince her that she cannot be without a father, she makes them question the necessity of the existence of a father who does not act as a father.

The progression from micro to meso to macro is outlined through five stages: the filmmaker herself; familiars, including family, close friends, and acquaintances; allies, who are individuals the storyteller meets and influences through the process of creating and sharing a story; a specific unknown targeted audience, consisting of those in positions of influence and responsibility, such as teachers, politicians, human resource and professional development specialists, social service providers, and law and policy makers; and the unknown mass, which

includes antipathetic audiences and/or a vast group of unidentified individuals. These five stages illustrate the development of the film's activism. While the director attempts to become a "normal" family with her partner at the beginning of the film, her decision to not to go to Germany, where her partner is, is the breaking point of her own awareness and transformation. Afterwards, the activism continues through her family, friends and neighbours. The interaction established with the audience during film screenings constitutes the third generation. Although it cannot be measured or observed directly, the widespread exposure, awards, and widespread coverage in the national press are sufficient to ensure to be active on unknown targeted audience and unknown mass.

In an autobiographical film, the author's on-screen presence highlights the mediating role of the camera operator and, potentially, a sound recordist. While the relationship of the director, that is, the main character of the film, with her environment is conveyed in the film through objective shots, there are also subjective shots and shots in which she establishes a direct, intimate dialogue with the audience with her gaze directed towards the viewfinder. If we put in words through Elizabeth Bruss' cautions, the film evolves from cinema 'eye' (the body behind the camera) to cinema 'I' (the body in the film) (as cited in Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997, p. 128).

4. CONCLUDING

This article has explored the intricate relationship between cinema, ideology, and self-representation, focusing particularly on the transformative potential of autobiographical documentaries. By analyzing *Expecting a Grain of Sand* (Dir. Aslı Akdağ, 2020), the study highlights how personal storytelling in film can serve as a counter-ideological tool, challenging dominant norms surrounding family and motherhood. The film's first-person narrative not only critiques societal expectations but also illuminates the broader implications of the "normal" on identity construction and social belonging.

The concept of the "normal"—the dominant cultural and social norms dictating what is acceptable or desirable—serves as a central theme in this analysis. *Expecting a Grain of Sand* crystallizes the potential of filmic narratives to transform these norms by using personal experiences to evoke empathy and shed light on systemic discrimination and prejudice. As the film invites audiences to witness and reflect on the societal pressures faced by a single mother in a conservative society, it exemplifies how sharing personal stories can evoke deeper emotional engagement than abstract discussions of inequality. Beyond its narrative and aesthetic qualities, *Expecting a Grain of Sand* offers a tangible example of how cinematic storytelling can generate real-world resonance. The film's public screenings, media visibility, and award recognition illustrate its ability to mobilize discourse beyond the confines of academic or activist circles. In this respect, the documentary not only functions as a counter-narrative within the cinematic space but also acts as a vehicle of cultural translation—making invisible experiences legible to broader audiences, including policy-makers, educators, and civil society actors. This aligns with the feminist principle of "the personal is political," which emphasizes the interconnection between private experiences and larger political structures, advocating for systemic change through personal narrative.

Through its exploration of key themes such as the "new transparency," everyday activism, and the politics of self-representation, this article emphasizes the power of autobiographical documentaries to amplify marginalized voices, foster empathy, and inspire collective action. These films blur the boundaries between the personal and the political, illustrating how individual experiences are inextricably linked to larger systemic structures. In addition, the emotive proximity generated through first-person perspective invites viewers to experience not merely the events but also the interiority of the subject. This affects not only understanding but feeling, positioning the audience as affective witnesses rather than distant observers. Such emotional engagement is pivotal for activating empathy and shifting social attitudes—especially in contexts where structural inequalities are deeply normalized or rendered invisible. Moreover, the framework of personal documentary activism provides a compelling lens for understanding how storytelling can initiate change on micro, meso, and macro levels.

The implications of this study extend beyond the specific case of *Expecting a Grain of Sand*. It underscores the need for further research into the role of film as a medium for social critique and activism. Future studies could examine the reception of autobiographical documentaries by diverse audiences, the ethical considerations in self-representation, and the long-term impact of such films on public discourse and policy. Building on this trajectory, future research could also employ reception studies or audience ethnographies to assess how viewers interpret and internalize these narratives across different sociocultural settings. Furthermore, comparative studies exploring autobiographical documentaries from various geopolitical contexts could reveal how the politics of representation and self-expression differ across regimes of censorship, cultural taboos, or activist traditions. These perspectives would help map the global diversity of everyday activism through film. Additionally, exploring how technological advancements and digital platforms shape the production and dissemination of first-person narratives offers promising avenues for inquiry.

In conclusion, autobiographical documentaries represent a powerful intersection of art, activism, and identity. By providing a platform for personal stories, these films challenge entrenched norms, foster inclusivity, and inspire audiences to reimagine possibilities for belonging and social change. As demonstrated by *Expecting a Grain of Sand*, the act of making one's private life visible through film not only justifies its own narrative significance but also serves as a profound tool for cultural transformation and social justice. By centering lived experience as a site of epistemic and political agency, this study contributes to ongoing debates in feminist media theory and participatory culture. It reaffirms the critical role of subjectivity in knowledge production and advocates for a model of media engagement that privileges voice, visibility, and vulnerability. In doing so, it positions autobiographical documentaries not merely as artistic artifacts, but as vital interlocutors in the public negotiation of identity, power, and belonging.

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